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THROUGH THE EYES OF BRAZIL'S AFRICAN DAUGHTERS
*Vision and Memory in the Artwork of Rosana Paulino and in the Short Fiction of Marilene Felinto**

When the past is weighted with private torment and institutionalized oppression, how is it possible to reveal the redemptive side of memory? This essay addresses the construction of memory from the point of view of two contemporary Afro-Brazilian women: Marilene Felinto (a fiction writer) and Rosana Paulino (a visual artist). Their creative works grow out of a process of re-membering or stitching together fragmented images and repressed emotions to validate individual identity and strengthen a collective consciousness. These works aim, in turn, to challenge a social system rife with discrimination and subjugation. From a gender- and racially-charged standpoint, Felinto and Paulino resist marginalization and transform their own and their ancestral experiences into confrontational visions rendered in images and text.

Avec les yeux de filles de l'Afrique au Brésil : vision et mémoire dans le travail artistique de Rosana Paulino et dans les nouvelles de Marilene Felinto

Lorsque le passé est chargé de tourment personnel et d'oppression institutionnalisée, comment est-il possible de révéler le côté rédempteur de la mémoire ? Cet essai s'intéresse à la construction de la mémoire du point de vue de deux femmes afro-brésiliennes contemporaines : Marilene Felinto (un auteur de fiction) et Rosana Paulino une artiste plasticienne. Leur travail créatif se développe à partir d'un processus de remémoration ou d'assemblage d'images fragmentées et d'émotions réprimées pour valider l'identité individuelle et renforcer une conscience collective. Ces travaux ont pour but, à leur tour, de s'attaquer à un système social dans lequel règnent la discrimination et la subjugation. Du point de vue de l'identité sexuelle et raciale, Felinto et Paulino résistent à la marginalisation et transforment leur propre expérience et celle de leurs ancêtres en visions conflictuelles exprimées sous formes d'images et de texte.

Através do olhar de duas filhas de África no Brasil: visão e memória na arte de Rosana Paulino e na ficção de Marilene Felinto

Na medida em que o passado se baseia em suplício pessoal e em opressão sistematizada, como é possível revelar um lado resgatável ou redimível da memória ? Este ensaio aborda a questão da construção da memória do ponto de vista de duas mu-lheres afro-brasileiras contemporâneas: Marilene Felinto (autora de ficção) e Rosana Paulino (artista plástica). As suas obras são criadas a partir de um processo para reconstruir ou remendar imagens fragmentárias e emoções reprimidas com o propósito de valorizar a identidade individual e reforçar uma conscientização

* A shorter version of this essay was presented at the 54th Kentucky Foreign Language Conference in Lexington, Kentucky in April 2001. I would like to acknowledge my Smith students in POR221: *The Brazilian Body*, whose insightful input on Marilene Felinto's novel *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo* during Spring 2001 inspired the origins of this essay. I dedicate this essay in memory of Richard Newman, civil rights activist and friend.

coletiva. Estas obras desafiam um sistema social fundado em princípios discriminatórios de subjugação. A partir de um ponto de vista orientado por questões de gênero e raça, Felinto e Paulino resistem à marginalidade e transformam as suas próprias assim como as suas ancestrais experiências, em visões de confrontação expressas por meio de imagens e texto.

«Since images that are counterhegemonic are necessarily provocative, their seductiveness, their allure lie in the freshness of insight and vision.»
bell hooks**, *Art on My Mind*

We remember what we want to remember: this truism accounts for the nostalgic tone of most reminiscences, be they public or private, visual or verbal. Not everything, however, follows a voluntary path toward remembrance. This lends memory the attributes of a double-edged sword.

In the classic study, *About Looking*, art critic John Berger affirms the power of the re-membered past. «Memory», he writes, «implies a certain act of redemption». In this redemptive role, memory serves as a means of rendering justice, as the act of remembering relies on the primary task of rescuing what otherwise would have been condemned to oblivion[1]. What if, however, the past holds such acute suffering that committing it to memory is damaging to the individual and damning to her society? Is it preferable to look away and forget? Or is the personal act of re-membering capable of rendering justice within a history riddled with condemnable abuse? Berger's recommendation would be to insist on weighing individual past experiences against a broader social and political memory[2].

This essay will investigate the private stirrings and public uses of memory in the works of two very different individuals, both contemporary Afro-Brazilian women artists: a writer, Marilene Felinto (b. 1957) and a visual artist, Rosana Paulino (b. 1967). Through their distinct creative paths – augmented by their gender – and racially-charged perspectives – they each depart from a legitimizing, personal stance to arrive at a militantly collective form of public memory. Their works offer resistance to Brazil's legacy of slavery and subordination by communicating, in the words of Tadeu Chiarelli, underlying traits of upheaval[3], to which they elicit social change.

As a course of action, both Marilene Felinto and Rosana Paulino prescribe to bell hooks' critical mandate regarding «the primacy of the image»[4], by employing visual image-rendering to lend significance to, to invoke, and to underscore the archaeological importance of memory. In the work of both women, memory

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** *Editorial note:* bell hooks is the pseudonym taken by Gloria Watkins, a well-known feminist thinker.

[1] J. Berger, «Uses of Photography», *About Looking*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980: 48-63, 54.

[2] *Ibid.:* 58.

[3] T. Chiarelli, «Photography in Brazil in the 1990s», *Lapiz*, 134-135, Jul.-Sept., 1997: 117-123, 120.

[4] B. Hooks, «In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life», *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, New York, The New Press, 1995: 61.

is seen as a connective, redemptive component linking present and past, personal and collective experiences. To borrow again from hooks, Felinto's and Paulino's works might then be said to articulate the convergence of public and private reality[5]. I would add that they address a women-based reality, which moves toward creating Berger's «social and political memory». It does so, in Berger's words, by rescuing from abandonment what has been officially forgotten[6], even if, in the case of these two artists, that which is unleashed acquires social significance out of rage and resistance. The Photograph, the Postcard: these are iconic forms of communication that employ the visual in order to make this rescue possible.

In Brazilian writer Marilene Felinto's 1991 collection of short stories – *Postcard* – she demonstrates a literary capacity for converting written words into images. This transformation serves a dual purpose: first, it allows the text to go beyond the personal to become a collective experience. Secondly, this shift also suggests an attempt to emphasize the importance of the visual element so essential in a society at large, such as Brazil, still dominated by illiteracy. Felinto's fictional work thus underscores visuality (and its corollary, orality, an element I will not investigate in this essay) in order to reach a collective body. For this purpose I wish to invoke the title of *Postcard,* an element that combines the visual and the written word into emblematic image and condensed text.

Rosana Paulino's artistic works from the 1990s integrate a variety of media in order to pull photography away from its purely documentary function. Paulino combines disparate elements into an alternative medium, the most common being photographs on cloth, with handmade stitching. As Yve Lomax has stated, this mixing of media combined with photography serves to create «a multiplicity of readings and a deliberate blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction»[7]. In terms of Paulino's artworks, then, this blending of media serves to contextualize the visual, thereby affording a textual quality to her visual pieces. Paulino's contextualizing technique approximates Berger's own recommendations for the creation of a social memory through alternative uses of photography: by constructing a context of experience that incorporates the collective sphere into the memory-fixing process[8]. Berger's general plea for the integration of photography into social memory directly parallels Tadeu Chiarelli's critical assertions about contemporary artists who infuse the creative process with life experiences[9].

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[5] B. Hooks, «Facing Difference: The Black Female Body», *Art . . ., op. cit.:* 99.

[6] J. Berger, *About . . ., op. cit.:* 54.

[7] H. Gresty & Y. Lomax, «'The World is Indeed a Fabulous Tale': Yve Lomax – A Practice around Photography», *in* Nigel Wheale (ed.), *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader,* London – New York, Routledge, 1995: 150-162, 159.

[8] J. Berger, *About . . ., op. cit.:* 60-61.

[9] T. Chiarelli, «La Mirada Contaminada: Otras fotografias/The Contaminated Gaze: Other Photographies», *Poliéster,* II (8), Spring 1994: 34-41, 34. His exact words address contemporary artists who manipulate «the photographic process by contaminating them with meanings and practices arising from life experiences».

Postcards from the Text

For the purposes of this introductory essay, I will limit my analysis to one short story in Marilene Felinto's collection entitled *Postcard:* «Visão da Bagaceira,» second in the sequence of eleven stories[10]. The short story's title alone, to which I will return below, expresses a multidimensional scope to visual meaning. The narrative underscores vision, and the sense of sight as a crucial step toward the making of memory, in that sensory elements trigger remembrances, forcing the mind to make connections. The element of nostalgia, or longing, is added so that one image in the present compels another, more distant one, to surface from the past. This act serves to link two disparate places, both part of the narrator's (and moreover the author's) personal experience. Much like Marilene Felinto's defiant first novel, *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo,* «Visão da Bagaceira» presents a specifically autobiographical connection between the Southern, industrial city of São Paulo and the Pernambucan *sertão* in Northeast Brazil[11]. By highlighting the sense of vision in this individualized account, Felinto also manages to summon a more universal response to memory, associated with a specific collective social experience: Brazil's cycle of domestic migration rooted in socio-economic adversity.

From the opening of «Visão da Bagaceira» the narrator makes the reader one with her sensory-based experience. Through vivid sight-oriented clues and simple associations, the reader accompanies the narrator's initial visual encounter, followed by a gradual sifting of memories toward self-revelation. In order to attain this more mature level of understanding, the narrator embarks on a journey (with the reader in tow); one which serves to displace her from urban to rural surroundings, as well as from present to past temporalities.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is standing in front of a large glass window (literally a wall of glass, which we might later compare to Rosana Paulino's *Wall of Memory*), a site that suggests double-sided (that is, outward and inward) reflection. As the narrator will discover, the glass, like memory itself, functions as both a lens and a barrier to past and present vision. From the first sentence, and through sole reliance on visual description, this narrator associates the apparatus before her (at first unidentified) with another familiar object seen through her mind's eye, affirming in her words: «it looked like something familiar»[12]. By the fourth sentence, the narrator has defined the familiar place, further linked to her own childhood experience, and revealed through contrasting sizes: that is, a giant outdoor market measured against the minute size of her infant hand. By the last sentence in this first paragraph, the association comes closer into view: the gigantic printing press behind the wall of glass in the big city summons a personal connection to the market by way of the visual content of a childhood recollection. The reader may not yet have fully grasped this precise connection (inquiring, for instance, what exactly the printing press is supposed to conjure), but in complete

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[10] All references to this short story is taken from the following edition: M. Felinto, «Visão da Bagaceira», *Postcard,* São Paulo, Iluminuras, 1991: 22-26.

[11] M. Felinto, *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo,* Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1982. This novel also appears in english translation under the title *The Women of Tijucopapo,* afterword and translation by Irene Matthews, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

[12] All translations from the Portuguese are my own. M. Felinto, *Postcard . . ., op. cit.:* 24.

alliance with the narrator, is able to let the full extent of her memory subsequently unfold.

The story's second paragraph is further testament to this mind's eye linkage of here and there, present and past, in which direct associations between objects and sensorial elements come into play by way of intense colors, heat, and rays of sunlight as sharp as piercing glass[13]. The narrator now acknowledges through repetition that the recognition is complete, with the words «I now know»[14]. At this point, full correspondence is made between two comparable machines: the printing press and the sugarmill, a mini-version of which, garnered from the narrator's childhood memory bank, would grind up sugarcane into juice to satiate the market's thirsty visitors.

These industrial objects further suggest how our memories are pressed out, bleeding into the interstitial spaces between adulthood and childhood. There is even a socio-ecological association to be made when the reader is guided toward the destructive implications of both sugarmill and printing press: the sugarcane plant is pressed into pulp and then juice as trees are pressed into pulp and then paper[15]. In keeping with Felinto's ongoing (and often highly controversial) resistance to her country's socio-economic elite[16] – an advocacy that inexorably binds class issues to racial matters – we might extend the metaphor to suggest that this association is perhaps testimony to Brazil's history of exploitation and exclusion. In the author's birthplace in Northeastern Brazil, sugar has been an essential economic commodity since colonial times when its production was dependent upon an enslaved labor force. Moreover, symbolic of the industrial and intellectual hegemony of the South, the press is synonymous with the privilege bestowed upon a cultural elite. These two power symbols clash mightily within the narrator's imaginary, generating moral conflict.

By the story's fourth paragraph the narrator's personal association linking two distinct geopolitical entities (urban South versus rural Northeast) has also been defined in atmospheric terms. The stifling heat of the city is one with the unmitigated heat of the barren-lands on market day[17]. The narrative tonally registers various hues, predominantly of green (pale light-green, sugarcane-green, fresh corn-green, for instance), in order to establish a bond with the natural landscape. The intensity and specificity of colors relating to the narrator's rural experience not only serve to contrast with the somber severity of urban gray and turquoise-steel gradations, but reinforce the gift of sight, emphasizing its direct route to memory. This sensory overload, with added stress on the visual element, juxtaposes sharply with the narrator's flashback tale of her life-altering encounter with blind beggars who are deprived of sight, and therefore are economically and socially marginalized.

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[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] This connection is made stronger in Portuguese through the double-meaning of the word *folha* which can signify a leaf on a tree as well as a piece of paper or newspaper page.

[16] The force of Felinto's criticism is best represented by her journalistic contributions: first as a columnist for *A Folha de São Paulo* and more recently for *Caros Amigos*.

[17] M. Felinto, *Postcard . . ., op. cit.:* 23-24.

In this sense, Marilene Felinto is also playing with the words in the title. The Portuguese *visão* – like the English word «vision» – can have several connotations: whereas it can simply mean the act of seeing, it can also refer to an image or apparition; moreover, it can also imply a way of perceiving or understanding things, or, even, the sense of achieving sudden insight or revelation. The word *bagaceira* also has several connotations, in direct relation to the sugarmill itself, specifically the area in which the crushed-up pulp is discarded. By extension, the word refers in more general terms to things that are residual, worthless, useless, to be rejected.

In its most elemental version, then, the short story's title could simply refer to the image of the grinding sugarcane mill which surfaces in the narrator's mind from the sight of the printing press. On another level, however, the title may stir national and social memories – particularly of the formerly slave-holding patriarchy – which in turn can be viewed metaphorically as a gnawing, devouring engine designed to segregate, now in human terms, prized ingredients from worthless ones. This urban/rural correspondence which transports the narrator into an interstitial space between adulthood and childhood signifies a transformative revelation on many levels.

Blindness and Revelation

In a world ruled by sight, the blind are themselves subject to marginalization. Moreover, within this inequitable social system, the blind beggars who inhabit the market are therefore doubly marginalized. Yet, as the story reveals, on another, gender-based level true to the narrator's experience, the blind beggars have learned to manipulate the system in order to destabilize her worldview, ultimately violating her innocence. Despite the beggars' literal blindness, their clever machinations serve to place the narrator at a disadvantage, by exposing her lack of awareness and inexperience. Memory thus becomes a repository for anguish and anger, rather than simply pleasurable reminiscences. Moreover, memory serves – both personally and historically – to underscore biases and injustice.

Interestingly, it is only after the blind beggars enter the story that the reader becomes cognizant of the narrator's gender: the narrator is female. Within the flashback to the market, she is portrayed as a child who is made uncomfortable by the beggars' request to her mother. They ask that she trade alms for her daughter's eyes, for the sake of them, that is, but the Portuguese is conveniently ambiguous[18]. The narrator/daughter becomes indignant because she recognizes that her eyes have been fashioned into a commodity, and become a product of exchange. She exclaims resentfully: «They wanted my eyes!»[19]. Felinto cleverly reinforces this personal reference to sight by immediately employing another Portuguese saying *«os olhos da cara»*, which literally means «the eyes on one's face», but is synonymous with the English expression to cost «an arm and a leg». Within the commercialized context of the marketplace, this saying equates the cost of an

[18] The original reads: «Uma esmolinha, dona, por caridade, pelos olhos de sua filha»: 24.
[19] M. Felinto, *Postcard . . ., op. cit.:* 24.

ear of corn, to use the story's example, with the cost of one's eyes, intending to convey an exorbitant expense.

Whereas the reader is perhaps grateful to the beggars for indirectly revealing the narrator's gender, the narrator herself is further confounded by the fact that the beggars' blindness does not prevent them from knowing her gender. In other words, they know, as if they could see, that her mother has a young daughter, not a son. This mystifying *in*sight alters the beggars' behavior accordingly. Moreover, they are prepared to use this knowledge to their own advantage, which in the narrator's mind is a means to inculcate double standards.

As the story goes on to describe, the narrator's heightened awareness and subsequent insight into the beggars' biased tactics lead to her loss of innocence. The vision of the city's printing press triggers this sobering recognition: the narrator/protagonist suddenly recalls her grasp of the blind beggars' trick, prompting them to «see» who is in front of them through the complicity of youngsters who have devised methods of conspiring with them. Suddenly, a childlike view of the market as entertainment is substituted by a subdued bird's eye view of its value as a place marked by double standards and deception. The narrator's own view of herself has become tainted by her market appeal, by her value as a commodity. Beyond her destabilized self, she distressingly recalls an assortment of animals for sale at the market, an association that, in turn, might hark back historically to an image of the market as a space for human bondage and trade[20].

To reinforce the narrator's sense of objectification, another childhood memory, filtered through her hardened adult lens, brings to the surface a supplemental image from the market: a tough, dagger-wielding, macho, cowboy-type whose bullying presence forces her to see reality as it is through grown-up eyes, where «the world was even worse than I had begun to imagine it was»[21]. She feels exploited and deceived by the very place, the very memory, of a pleasant moment in childhood. Moreover, the narrator is jarred into adult associations, in which the market's dusty ground has turned a muted gray that matches the artificial tone of the coveralls worn by the big city's newspaper workers. By the end of the story we see her back at the glass window, where she has learned in her seasoned adulthood to equate the *sertão* market and the printing press as different forms of mass media, of communicative visual and cultural manipulation. The tear that she sheds for her loss of self, in her words, «for who I was and for who I am,» for the past and the painful realizations of the present, rolls down from her eye, but there is no ground to catch it[22]. Memory – what began as a pastoral haven – is revealed to be as double-edged, as transparent, as the plate-glass before her.

Marilene Felinto's fictional works tend to present us with women who are dealt these kinds of raw, sock-it-to the stomach, grow-up fast experiences, which in turn sharpen the edges of the narratives' tones. Ultimately, past and present intersect through vision-induced memories to unleash a reality that is seamlessly biased and unjust. The story's open-ended conclusion is meant to convey this sense of adversity.

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[20] *Ibid.:* 25.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.:* 26.

At the end of «Visão da Bagaceira» it is up to the reader to construct a future self for the adult-weary narrator, to project new visionary prospects. We can only imagine that she might emulate the combative, defiant, even vindictive individual who narrated the coming-of-age story in *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*. For this she must rely on what João Camillo Penna has described as a «collective revolution»[23]. In the case of Rísia, the narrator/protagonist of *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo,* this collective mission is based on an arduous journey leading to personal empowerment. First she encounters persistent peril as she voyages toward her mother's Northeastern hometown, where at last she gains restorative vitality from within a circle of women warriors who vow to protect and defend her. Unlike the full-bodied image of this empowering ritual, the nameless narrator of «Visão da Bagaceira» has only taken the first step in her journey of self-discovery, one in which, through a razor-sharp lens of perception, she confronts society's harsh (grinding) practices based on discrimination and exploitation. The reader, then, must become her warrior-ally, harnessing her individual memories into a collective force designed to denounce, and ultimately dismantle (the walls of) inequity.

Queens of the Snapshot

«The truth is that most photographs
taken of people are about suffering,
and most of that suffering is man-made.»
John Berger, *About Looking*

«Once we embrace [a] vision of the
collapse of public and private, the
convergence of the individual and
the collective, we open ourselves to
the possibility of communion and
community.»
bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*

Through very different means, Rosana Paulino's artworks uncover a similar need to position and legitimize the self within a collective force. Although her methodology is quite different from that of Marilene Felinto, she also relies on memory to «articulate the convergence of private and public reality», and of present and past[24]. Moreover, in a country prone to social amnesia, particularly when it comes to socio-economic, racial and/or sexual discrimination, Paulino aesthetically calls for what bell hooks terms the healing (and, I might add, future-altering) power of memory[25].

As a visual artist, Rosana Paulino is actively and politically defiant when it comes to asserting her standing as a black woman in Brazil. In fact, Maria Hirszman has stated that Paulino's work in its entirety reflects upon these personal aspects of her identity, while in a broader sense it denounces social conditions, and sexist as well as racist injustice in Brazil. Rosana Paulino herself has

[23] J.C. Penna, «Marilene Felinto e a diferença», *Revista de Crítica Literária Latinoamerica*, XXI (41), 1995: 241.

[24] B. Hooks, *Art . . ., op. cit.:* 99.

[25] *Ibid.:* 95.

been quoted as saying that in her art, she only tackles issues that are personally distressing: *« Eu só trabalho com questões que me incomodam »*[26].

To borrow from bell hooks' critical language, Paulino's works articulate new modes of contestation[27], against an enduring social backdrop in which women have been regarded – and perpetually exploited – as commodities (and in the case of black women, this reality reaches even greater proportions). In her works of the mid-to-late 1990s Rosana Paulino embarked on a mission to explore the biased representation of the female body in art. In 1995 she exhibited her work in her native São Paulo, alongside a Berlin artist in a show entitled «A New Face in Hell», which included her drawings documenting the deterioration of Catarina, a beautiful blonde doll Paulino had owned as a child. By portraying her doll's decay, Paulino chose to register beauty's ephemeral nature[28]. Like Marilene Felinto, she also captured a child's loss of innocence, unveiled through an adult-size lens that exposes beauty's flawed ties to prejudicial ideals. In a similar vein, Paulino has dedicated her artistic production to a 1997 series of «anti-fashion» drawings entitled «Album of Sketches» *(Álbum de Desenho)*, as well as another series called «Models» (1996-1998), in which she questions Brazil's enslavement to artificial (and Caucasian) standards of beauty imposed from the outside[29].

Despite the critical success of these later drawings, it is Paulino's earlier work that is the main focus of this essay. Within a trajectory aimed at empowerment through active denunciation of Brazil's colonial past, she begins by tracing her female ancestors through a type of personal, visual heritage. Through a provocative combination of photography and pen-and-ink drawing, Paulino not only venerates motherhood and domestic life, but converts this traditional homage into an act of rebellion and departure. Her 1993 piece entitled «Small Queens of the Home No. II» *(Pequenas rainhas do lar no. II)* consists of a centrally-placed, detailed black and white photograph of two children in traditional, frontal poses, flanked on either side by a quickly-rendered ink sketch suggestive of a baby (one of them eerily represented without a head). In Paulino's works, such as this one, female children are often likened to royalty, for, as the title suggests, they are honored as small queens in the home; they are also frequently equated with Catholic iconography, such as representations of angels or martyred saints, as well as iconic associations with the Virgin Mary.

In another similar work from this early period, entitled «Hail Our Queen, Mother of Suffering» *(Salve rainha, mãe de misericórdia)*, Paulino creates a loosely-arched triptych by inserting an ordinary snapshot of a woman between two simply-drawn sets of twin angels. In such works, Paulino understatedly captures the ambiguity which characterizes female roles: women are often portrayed as self-sacrificing bearers of children, narrowly circumscribed within the traditional

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[26] M. Hirszman, «Memória Tecida em Patuás», *Jornal da Tarde*, 25 Feb. 1997.

[27] B. Hooks, *Art . . ., op. cit.:* 53.

[28] A. Gonçalves Filho, «Duplos mostram uma nova cara no inferno», *O Estado de São Paulo, Caderno 2*, 9 Nov. 1995.

[29] J. Medeiros, «Rosana Paulino faz um mostruário 'antifashion'», *O Estado de São Paulo, Caderno 2*, 25 Nov. 1997; M. Hirszman, «Revendo a obra de Rosana Paulino», *O Estado de São Paulo, Caderno 2*, 9 Mar. 1999.

domestic sphere, while at the same time they hover in a space beyond reality distinguished by symbolic deification and/or martyrdom. The handwritten caption in Portuguese under the central photograph confirms this double-edged status, in small caps: «hail our queen, mother of suffering». Paulino's crafted juxtaposition of ink drawings and photographs in these examples invites the viewer to participate in an undercurrent of contestation designed to resist the historical implications of women's – particularly those of black women – constricted roles.

Re-Membering the Lens of the Past

On a grander, more impressive scale which directly confronts Brazil's legacy as a slave-holding colony, in 1995 Rosana Paulino transferred hundreds of photographs – often by way of photocopy – of her relatives and ancestors to small pillow-like sacks made of cloth (what she terms *travesseirinhos* or «little pillows»), in an attempt to deviate from and defy the objectification of the black (female) body during slavery. By appearing on the surface to duplicate the ways in which nineteenth-century photography defined black individuals as exotic objects, Paulino's work unleashes the dehumanizing aspects of slavery. On the surface, these portraits may appear innocuous and passive – two-dimensional memories in some cases un-tethered to names and dates, free-falling through the visual record – but the act of uniting them in a patchwork format imparts a testimonial-like quality that transmits a continuum of active strength and solidarity.

In this striking work, appropriately entitled «Wall of Memory» *(Parede da Memória),* Paulino masterfully draws on her creative handiwork to channel a shared universe, to which she, by way of her African ancestors, is undeniably connected. The viewer stands before the images of these women who together constitute a collective, re-membered cosmology, symbolic of struggle and endurance. The latter is re-contextualized into positive action, summoning transformation out of centuries of torment and marginalization. Despite its determinedly resistant spirit, embodied in the solidity of the wall image, Paulino's message is also softened by the medium of cloth (and/or drawing), as well as by the fact that the validation of her own identity as the master-builder of this sisterhood is woven into the aesthetic equation. The paradoxical combination of the pliable cloth against the sturdiness of the wall – a pairing symbolic of a fiercely feminine resistance – imparts a sock-it-to-the-stomach punch, reminiscent of Felinto's fiction.

Like other contemporary Brazilian artists, Rosana Paulino appropriates old photographs for use in new work, a technique that, according to Antonio Gonçalves Filho, creates a type of photographic archeology characterized by a search for lost identity, or, I would suggest, evokes an extension of visual memory beyond the merely personal. This Brazilian identity, Gonçalves Filho argues, was crushed by a society in which basic principles of citizenship were defined as abstract concepts, unattainable to the subaltern majority of the population[30].

Paulino's «Wall of Memory» combines techniques to create a commanding collective portrait. In this sense, memory becomes a synthetic creation, literally stitched

[30] A. Gonçalves Filho, « Panorama explora volta do corpo na arte », *O Estado de São Paulo, Caderno 2,* 5 Nov. 1997.

together out of fragmented images. In other words, Paulino creates a literal and deliberate wall of memory through placement and repetition of images, images that in their relationship to each other affirm a familial bond. As the (re)construction of memory involves a handmade, conscious act of patching together disparate lives to form a whole, so viewers, too, in all their broad diversity, stitch Paulino's remembered sisterhood into the quilt of their own visual experiences. The audience becomes intertwined into the artwork by way of its communal outreach.

According to Tadeu Chiarelli, who has critically analyzed 1990s photography in Brazil, Rosana Paulino combines old photographs with other materials in order to create installations where «images of women stand side by side with other objects which almost always come from a traditionally female world»[31]. He claims that through this juxtaposition of materials as well as objects, Paulino is thus «trying to find a place for herself as a woman and a Black artist in contemporary Brazil»[32].

I would like to conclude this brief analysis of Rosana Paulino's artworks with her visually powerful «Untitled» *(Sem título)* piece, from 1997, as the single image it projects is emblematic of the individual impotence against injustice depicted in Marilene Felinto's short story «Visão da Bagaceira». Paulino's piece consists of a round embroidery frame in the center of which is a close-up, black and white photograph of a young black woman's face, in frontal view. Her mouth has been pronouncedly stitched up with thick dark thread, so as to obscure the entire area. Moreover, the stitching has severely altered the smooth texture of the background material, giving it a creased look, radiating out from the mouth opening. According to Aracy Amaral, Paulino has overcome «feminine nostalgia» by lending a dark, non-domestic side to the act of sewing. This young woman's face is, in the words of Amaral, «attacked and silenced by the subtle violence» of the stitches[33]. If the image is meant to unforgivably conjure tortuous forms of slave subjugation, it is also intended to represent the abiding suppression of a great part of Brazil's repressed society. This piece addresses the artist's own present-day reality, yet also reaches back into a collective past of violation and oppression.

Rosana Paulino creates these mixed media, alternative pieces in order to trigger the process of memory within herself (and by association in the viewer). Memory's collective consciousness bears witness to a compendium of ills triggered by intolerance on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, and social class. In the works I have briefly analyzed in this essay, Marilene Felinto and Rosana Paulino act as masterminds in the stitching together of memory. Born out of individual isolation and repressed rage, their construction of memory aspires to a collective consciousness by way of a partnership with the reader or viewer. Each woman renders this connection possible through different means. Felinto grasps the reader's understanding through a highly personalized process of self-revelation, gushing forth from inner opposition to social inequity. Paulino, on the other hand, relies

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[31] T. Chiarelli, «Photography . . .», *op. cit.:* 119.

[32] T. Chiarelli, «La Mirada . . .», *op. cit.:* 39.

[33] A. Amaral, «Rosana Paulino: Women and Their Bodies», *Virgin Territory: Women, Gender, and History in Contemporary Brazilian Art,* Washington, DC, National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2001: 92.

on the viewer's recognition of a collective sisterhood, grown out of centuries of human subjugation. As Rosana Paulino's and Marilene Felinto's works have shown, even if words themselves are ineffectual effectors of social change, visual images are universally indelible in their ability to conjure up the power of a collective memory, as well as in their undeniable capacity to denounce all forms of oppression and injustice.

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